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Goya as a Designer of Tapestry

BY HAROLD DONALDSON EBERLEIN



GOYA'S work as a painter of cartoons for tapestries is much less generally known than is his work in other directions. Indeed, many well-informed people know nothing of it at all. This is doubtless chiefly because his later paintings and his etchings have completely overshadowed the lustre of his earlier productions. But it is also partly because Spanish tapestries themselves have never been so thoroughly known nor exploited as the tapestries produced by the looms of other countries.

In 1720, Philip V. of Spain established the factory of Santa Barbara in Madrid which, saving a brief suspension from 1808 to 1815, has continued in operation to the present time. At the period when Goya was making his cartoons, the tapestry art had already sunk into advanced stages of decline and other media of decoration had combined to thrust tapestries as wall adornments from the pre-eminent position they had held for so many centuries throughout all Christendom.

Goya's genius for a time, it is true, imparted a new lease of life to their local popularity, but this respite was only temporary, for the process of general decay in the art and the spirit of the age, which sought more after other forms of decorative satisfaction, precluded, then, anything like

a restoration of their former importance.

We shall best gain an appreciative insight into the spirit that informed the canvases which Goya prepared for subsequent translation into tapestries if we glance at the story of his life up to the time when he was employed to make designs for the looms of Santa Barbara. Born of peasant parents, in 1746, at the little village of Fuentetodos, near Saragossa, he began to study at the age of fifteen under José Luzan Martinez. Being of a burning, tempestuous disposition that carried him into work and play alike with a very whirlwind of ardour, he not only made signal progress in his art but also evinced a somewhat less fortunate aptitude of getting involved in any outside disturbance that might be going on.

When he was nineteen years old, having taken an active part in one of the frequent street brawls between the parading partisans of rival parishes, in which the affray ended fatally for several of the participants, it became necessary for him to leave the neighbourhood at once and his friends packed him off post haste to Madrid.

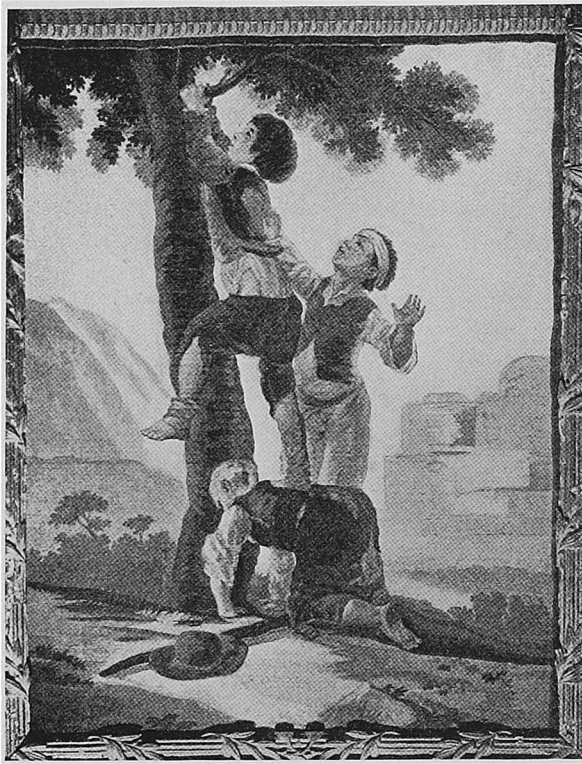
There, too, under the urge of an unsubdued and ebullient temperament, this roystering young blade managed to keep pretty constantly in hot water as the result of one escapade



A TAPESTRY BY
GOYA



A TAPESTRY BY
GOYA



BOY CLIMBING A TREE. TAPESTRY DESIGNED BY GOYA. IN THE PALACE OF THE ESCORIAL, MADRID

or another. He was, amongst various accomplishments that his receptive mind had picked up, a good musician. Being likewise blessed with a very fine voice, and emulous of the gallantries of the period, he very naturally took to serenading the ladies, with too much frequency and fervour, as it turned out. After being picked up one night with a poignard wound in his back, (thanks to one of his ardent gallantries and the jealousy of a rival), it again became expedient for him to go promptly elsewhere and to avoid Madrid for a season. This time he determined to go to Rome for the purpose of study.

He was obliged to make this expedition at his own expense. His "swash-buckling Don Juan" conduct had evidently not won the favor of the dignified court functionaries who had it in their power to help him. At any rate, he did not enjoy the royal patronage nor receive the financial assistance often accorded promising young art students Romeward bound. Without sufficient resources for

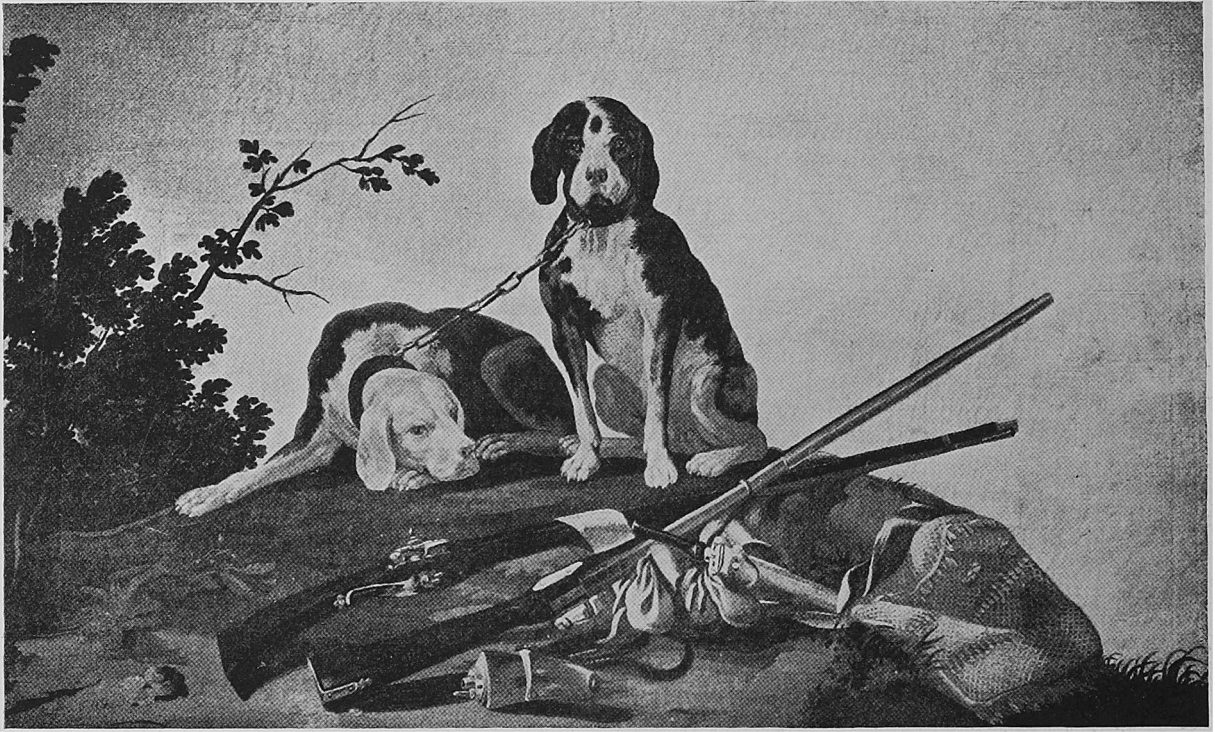
such a journey, he was, therefore, compelled to make shift as best he could. Accordingly he joined himself to an itinerant *quadrilla* of bull-fighters and in this company he went from town to town until he reached the shores of the Mediterranean.

This outline of Goya's career is relevant to our immediate subject because it shows how thoroughly he was identified with the street life of the time and all the other phases of existence amongst the masses of the people, quite apart as it was from such recognition and friendship as his fascinating personality may have won for him from persons of rank. We shall see, by-and-by, how he soon employed this intimate knowledge.

In Rome, as was his wont, Goya devoted himself assiduously to both study and pleasure, profiting much from the former. The latter again betrayed him into uncomfortable complications and he was obliged to quit Rome suddenly, after which he reappeared in Madrid in 1775. Through the good offices of influential



BOYS GATHERING FRUIT. TAPESTRY DESIGNED BY GOYA IN THE PALACE OF THE ESCORIAL, MADRID



HUNTING DOGS. TAPESTRY DESIGNED BY GOYA. IN THE PALACE OF THE ESCORIAL, MADRID

friends he was presented to Mengs, the all-powerful Superintendent of Fine Arts who, in 1776, commissioned him to design some cartoons for the royal tapestry factory of Santa Barbara.

Up to this time the designs used for the Santa Barbara looms had all been grandiose mythological heroics. Goya promptly cast aside the whole mythological paraphernalia, which Mengs seems to have expected him to use, and confined himself to subjects inspired by contemporary national life. All those who were in any way concerned with the cartoons or the tapestries, or who saw and knew about them, were first amazed and then delighted, not least of all Mengs himself. Goya's work thenceforth became the talk of the court and of the city, and through this, the initial effort of his public career, he assumed his true position as a national painter and the interpreter of the life of his countrymen.

Between 1776 and 1791 he produced forty-five *genre* cartoons from which ninety-two tapestries were woven. Upon

the merits of these tapestries the reputation of the Santa Barbara factory mainly rests. Taken together they form a complete and true pictorial representation of Spanish life at the end of the Eighteenth century, with its fêtes, its costume, its games and its wide diversity of strongly individual character types no less picturesque than the garb they wore or the environment in which they were set.

Had Goya not lived his earlier years as he did; had he tasted and shared less fully and less sympathetically, as one of their own number, the lives of those whom he now so faithfully portrayed; had the very social atmosphere he now depicted not been hitherto a part of his being; had he consorted less freely and familiarly with bull-fighters and beggars, smugglers and mendicant monks, alguazils and even bandits; had he not been here a guest at a village wedding, there taking part in a picnic, now playing cards with lackeys, again paying his court to and dancing with the village damsels, he could never have painted



PESTA IN THE COUNTRY. TAPESTRY DESIGNED BY GOYA. IN THE PALACE OF THE ESCORIAL, MADRID

with the lively verisimilitude that all his canvasses display.

Some of his pastoral scenes, at a superficial glance, suggest the manner of Watteau, but a moment's careful study dispels the impression, reveals their trenchant individuality and shows that all the personages are, not merely "pretty figures," but thoroughly Spanish in every least particular and eloquent of local character. The same Iberian impress is indelibly stamped upon every item of the setting—upon the animals, the buildings, the landscape and, indeed, upon the very habit of the trees.

One factor in the popular acclaim and recognition that Goya's cartoons immediately elicited, as soon as they became known, was doubtless the capti-

vating fidelity with which he seized and showed in enduring form to his contemporaries the real beauty of the everyday life which they knew but were apt to disregard, in the wonted manner of all ages. By abandoning the formal heroics to which they had been accustomed and depicting instead the inherent charm of their local environment he held up a mirror before their eyes and opened a fresh avenue of appreciation. With it all he combined a subtle emanation of his own vigorous personality and imparted a rare union of dignity and vivacity. Though one knew nought of Goya's subsequent achievements, the creation of the tapestry cartoons by this master of a multi-colored brain would alone entitle him to lasting fame.